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ABSTRACT

When outlining is used as a task to focus discussion of a reading selection in small collaborative learning groups, it helps students to map out a sequence of ideas on a trial basis, takes the pressure off students to come up with a "right answer," and gives them a feel for the process by which meaning gradually develops and unfolds. This outlining technique was developed in an experimental block program for basic skills students at Lehman College in New York. In the program, the students took the same four courses together. A process-oriented writing class inspired this use of outlining in a reading class as a way to help overcome the basic skills student's characteristic failure to get an overview of the whole text. Externalizing the reading process through a series of outlining exercises increased the students' confidence and facilitated their ability to transform their reading to personal outline, to group discussion outline, and to freewriting. (JL)

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Outlining as a Process-Oriented Group Task in the Reading Classroom

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An ability to make an outline is one of the skills that students are expected to know but that teachers of both reading and writing avoid in classroom instruction. Reading teachers often avoid outlining tasks because students become too focused on the "correctness" of the outline (Hansell, 1978). Many writing teachers prefer not to use outlines because they want students to move through the process of free writing to a final draft.

However, when outlining is used as a task to focus the discussion of a reading selection in small collaborative learning groups, the outlining skill can play an extremely useful role in a reading or study skills class. Making outlining a group project avoids the students' use of an outline as a straight jacket (as was once the case in writing classes) or the students' viewing the outline as "the answer" (as was once the case in reading classes). In the groups, outlining is used as

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a tool which allows students to map out a sequence of ideas on a trial basis and as a focus for group discussion. The outline is presented to the group as a graphic vehicle that can be rewritten, rearranged and modified as students develop their understanding of the reading selection.

The outline used in this way serves as a study aid for students who are struggling with reading about ideas, especially basic skills students who characteristically have difficulty with abstraction. For these students it is almost a necessity to have a vehicle such as an outline that allows them to sort out and to track ideas in the text. The outline becomes a roadmap of the internal and invisible process of reading.

The use of the collaborative learning group is an essential factor in making this flexible use of the outline effective. Making an outline in a group takes the pressure off students to come up with the "right answer," encouraging students to pause over the reading, to go over it in detail and to explore the connections between main ideas and details. As the group discusses the passage and changes their ideas about the outline, it gets marked up and revised, giving students a feel for the process by which meaning gradually develops and unfolds.

This outlining technique was developed in the context of an experimental block program for basic skills students at Lehman College of the City University of New York. In this program, called the Core Curriculum, twenty-five students took

the same four courses together -- writing, reading, autobiography and logic. The courses in the Core Curriculum included a great deal of work and discussion together in groups and a spirit of shared communication developed. As one student explained it in his journal:

> In the Core you have a friendship with the Core members and you meet other students and their families through their writing or through the talking we all share with each other.

The Core Curriculum concept fostered cooperation both among students in their classes and among faculty. The writing class, taught by Prof. Elaine Avidon of the Lehman-based New York City Writing Project, offered me a model for how process-oriented groups could be used in the classroom. In Prof. Avidon's class, students often worked in groups of four or five, reading their compositions together and helping each other with revisions. Each member of the group brought in their rough drafts to discuss with the whole group, the idea being to shift the emphasis from product to process. In the writing groups, students had a responsive audience of their peers and the students' writing developed in the give and take of group discussion.

Inspired by my colleague's work, I thought that reading would also flourish with this kind of peer interation. As Moffett (1981) points out when he recommends vocal reading in

partnerships in Coming on Center:

> Solo silent reading may be goal, but it's not means. The means are social, interactive, and external until the process is learned, and then they can go on internally.

I felt that group discussion would especially help with a characteristic problem of the basic skills reader, getting an overview of the whole text. Students too often get lost in the details of a passage; it was my hope that group discussion of a text would help students to put the details of the passage into the context of an overall structure. I therefore decided to use task-oriented collaborative learning groups to encourage students to discuss reading selections in depth -- to pause over what they had read, to go over it in detail and to understand the connections between main ideas and major points. The task that I would use in these small reading groups would be making an outline together.

I knew that it would be especially useful for my reading groups if the reading process could be externalized and made visible in the same way that a rough draft makes the writing process external. An outline, like a rough draft, could be held, discussed, marked on and revised. As students discussed the passage and changed their ideas about it, the outline would be changed, giving students an indication of the nature of reading as a process in which the meaning develops through a give and take between the reader and the text.

Research on study skills suggests that outlining is a useful approach to teaching reading comprehension, because it puts the focus on the primary processes of comprehension and helps students to identify relevant ideas and to fit them into a meaningful pattern (Hansell, 1978). However, research also suggests that outlining produces positive results as a study technique only when students receive extensive training in how to outline (Armbruster and Anderson, 1981; Anderson and Armbruster, in press). For this reason, I prefaced the work in groups with a week of instruction in the technique of making an outline. I began by discussing how organization can help a reader to remember the things that he or she reads and how organization can reveal the structure that is hidden in ideas. I began by putting a randomized list on the board and asking students to organize and rearrange that list:

> Star Trek, gold, orange, silver, M.A.S.H., steel, Happy Days, apple, Superman, Aluminum, Rocky, gray, pear, brown, Star Wars, copper, pink, pineapple.

I included some ambiguous examples in the list to show students that some personal decision-making is involved in classifying things. One student listed Star Trek as a movie, another listed it as a television show. Similarly, gold was classified as a metal by some students and as a color by others, and so on. This difference of opinion was extremely important for many students because they thought of making an outline as a

catechism, an exercise in getting the right answer. To most of them it was a liberating revelation that each student can decide on an outline structure that works for him or her:

> I thought I really did everything wrong because what I had wasn't the same as what Steve wrote. But he told us in the middle of the class that everyone is different. No one might have it exactly the same way. That made me feel better.

Up to this point, I had not used any numbers or letters to indicate a traditional outline structure. I preferred to make teaching this system a separate lesson. To teach the traditional letter-number system for outlining, I gave students a new type of list, one that required more structure to organize. I took my first example from sports. This list included one or two items that did not seem to belong -- soccer, baseball, football, basketball, the New York Yankees, and the Atlanta Braves. Students saw that some kind of level or ordering of lists was needed. At this point, I showed them I-II-III-IV and A-B-C as a way of showing the difference between the general category of "baseball" and the more specific terms such as the Yankees and Braves:

Sports

I. Soccer
II. Baseball
    A. New York Yankees
    B. Atlanta Braves
III. Football
IV. Basketball

It proved to be more important to move slowly and to give plenty of opportunity for reinforcement; outlining is a difficult concept.

Students saw that the same list could be the beginning of a whole new system:

Baseball

I. The Atlanta Braves
II. The New York Yankees
  A. Dave Winfield
  B. Ron Guidry
III. California Angels
  A. Reggie Jackson
  B. Rod Carew

At every step it was important for students to realize that the structure that they set up is flexible, that the "right answer" could take several forms.

The next stage was to begin to read and outline; we began work with an article which had a clearly-defined organization by classification: "Three Faces of Youth." We used the outline to identify the thesis of the article, its major points, and supporting details. For homework, I gave students another easy classification article to outline on their own. Just as they wrote their first drafts for writing in class outside the group, so I asked them to prepare an outline of an article on their own and bring it into class. I asked several students to put their outlines on the board and we went over the outlines together to confirm the fact that each student knew how to

write an outline and again to confirm that there were several different ways to approach the same task.

The third reading assignment was more difficult; this was the assignment that I wanted the students to work on in small groups. I asked students to read an discuss a short excerpt by Max Lerner, "Some American Types" (1957). The writing was more challenging, but the format of the selection was again simple classification. When students brought in their homework, I put them into groups of four or five. The task that was given to each group was to go over their homework and to make a composite outline that represented the best of their homework outlines. This assignment meant that students had to discuss the article, decide among themselves what the main ideas were and agree on the best way to present the main ideas in the outline.

As the students talked, they wrote up a new outline. The effect was to create a new version as they were in the process of refining and further developing their view of the content of the piece. After each group made a composite outline, they put it on the blackboard. There were three large blackboards in the room, so there was room for one outline from each group. Then we repeated the discussion and outlining procedure in the larger group, producing a final composite outline for the class. Each discussion increased the possibility that students would

get a fuller grasp of the material as they reached a classroom consensus about the meaning of the piece. This is how the final outline looked:

Some American Types

Thesis: The author discusses in the article the people that are typical of society today.

I. The Fixer
   A. Can get a traffic fine settled.
   B. Can get it for you wholesale, whatever you need.
   C. Can "get over."

II. The Inside Dopester
   A. Is "wised up" and "in the know."
   B. Doesn't really believe in society.

III. The Neutral Man
   A. Is detached.
   B. Is afraid of conflicts.
   C. Nothing means anything.

IV. The Conformist
   A. Always goes with the majority.
   B. Hates foreigners and immigrants.
   C. Will take a stand, but for what?

V. The Routiner

A. The man in uniform

1. Police and fireman

2. Armed forces

3. Railroads and subways

B. "The man in the grey flannet suit"

1. Salesmen

2. Secretaries

3. Executives

C. Life in society is becoming a bureaucracy.

VI. The Status Seeker

A. Works hard, but only to climb the ladder.

B. Wants to be up when everybody else is pulled down.

When this final outline was finished, I erased it and we began the process again with a new article. I did not have the students write down the outline because I wanted to emphasize the process of reading and thinking together, not the final product.

Students had a positive reaction to working in groups. In the group students are more adventurous and thoughtful in sharing and developing their ideas than when the teacher is present. One student wrote about the confidence the group gave her in her journal:

> I learned quite a lot in our outlining group today. The article was very hard in a lot of ways, but I sat there and tried to pick up everything that was being said. That is how you attack an article and get to understand what it says.

She, like most students, focused not on the "correctness" of the outline, but on the process of understanding and the techniques of approaching a reading passage:

> My experience today was kind of good. I learned a different way of picking out the important things in an article for an outline. In my outline, I didn't really have any of the things that was put on the board, but Steve said that as long as the outline makes sense and has the outlining form, it's ok.

Other students went on to transform the things they learned in the group to new modes of comprehension, including new modes of sharing ideas with others:

> When I finished my outline, I tried to make a speech out of it and I could. That's why I feel my outline is good. What the group has on the board is just another way of doing an outline.

Because students worked together in groups and shared four classes together, they had an audience of peers for this kind of playful transformation. The reading became an outline and the outline became a speech. The speech might one day become an essay. I was pleased, but not surprised, to find

"Some American Types" had been used by one student in a free-writing exercise in the writing class:

> What else can make people change? They change as they grow older. They become more aware of their acts and care more as they grow. I was looking at my pen trying to find the answer why people change and I didn't find an answer. I feel tired; I want to rest and go to sleep but I can't . . . This reminded me of what Steve said about the status seeker who wants to go upward and that's what I want to do, go upward and never look back.
>
> What makes people change? School can make people change. It could teach people things they didn't know and help them understand it so that they know what they are doing and what they want.
>
> Being poor can make people change, most of the time to the bad. They think, do I have a future? Will I be able to make one for myself? But most of these people are like the article we did for Steve's calss; in a way it's like dealing drugs. You got your fixer, the one who gets your goods; you got your inside dopester, the one who will tell you where to get your stuff; you got your conformist who does what the majority of what his neighborhood or friends do; you got your routiner . . . who is almost like the conformist but isn't. He just does the thing over and over again, the same thing. Well, enough of that. I'm forgetting my purpose. What makes people change? Friends . . .

This free writing is one of a series of transformations -- from reading to personal outline to group discussion to group outline to free writing. The instruction I had given in the flexibility of the outline as a method of organizing reading facilitated the transformation. However, the major

catalyst to this kind of creativity was, I believe, the work in groups for which the outline-making had been an organizing focus.

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